

Utah Bridges

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In our opinion

Utah's decaying bridges require urgent attention

Decaying bridges all over Utah have the state Department of Transportation and local communities in a bind. The problem is large — and growing. While the repair bill seems steep, it amounts to a comparatively small part of the overall state budget.

As pointed out by *Deseret News* staff writer Lee Davidson in a copy-righted story this week, state and federal inspection reports show 332 bridges in Utah are classified as "deficient." Of those, 230 are in the "should be replaced" category because of serious structural problems.

Fortunately, UDOT has a vigorous program of inspection and testing and no bridges are in danger of immediate collapse. However, close watch is being kept on some exceptionally bad bridges, and 29 are classed as being in critical condition, needing urgent action. Another five have been closed.

What the total figures mean is that one in every 13 of the 2,463 bridges in Utah has problems. While that is straining the state's capacity to solve the situation, it isn't as bad as the national average, which shows that 42 percent of all bridges are in trouble.

Total cost of repairing or replacing the Utah bridges is estimated at \$103 million. Even with the help of federal funds, UDOT can only provide about \$10 million a year for the job — \$6 million to \$7 million worth of maintenance and \$3 million for replacement.

And time is not on the side of the

bridges. As some projects are completed and taken off the list, others are added. The interstate system is now 30 years old in places — approaching the lifetime limit for bridge decks.

Trying to come up with additional sources of funds for bridge repairs is not easy in a climate of tight budgets and possible tax rollbacks. In fact, if a five-cent gasoline tax adopted 18 months ago were to be repealed — part of a tax rollback initiative on the November ballot — UDOT would lose \$40 million a year, much of it for maintenance and construction programs for roads and bridges.

Even if that money stays in the budget, highway officials look five years ahead and shudder at what they see. By then, even minimum needs for bridge upkeep and replacement will go partially unmet.

What's the answer to the bridge problem? Clearly, it has to be more money to do the necessary work.

Some of the options include higher gasoline taxes, a difficult choice in the face of possibly losing some of the existing tax; or toll roads, a highly unpopular alternative; or some involvement of the private sector, usually in the form of fees — viewed as unwelcome by business.

This is not an issue that can simply be postponed. The bridges are going to keep decaying, no matter what people say. And the longer the delay, the more urgent and more expensive the solution.